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On Phlegmasia Dolens

By

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of

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## Phlegmasia Dolens.

The remarkable affection of the lower extremities incident, almost exclusively, to lying in women, has received various denominations. It is the Anasarca Serosa of Bullen. In his Nosology, he ranks this genus of disease in the class bæcæxæ and order Intumescentia. It is called by Savages Phlegmasia Lactea, by some writers Oedema Lacteum. Dr Horach places it under his second class Phlegmasia, and genus Cruritis. But as there are cases on record of its affecting the superior extremities, the correctness of this appellation is doubtful.

It is now pretty well known in this country, by the name of Phlegmasia Dolens, or the vulgar title of milk-leg. But it must be enumerated among those diseases, whose causes recent inquiries have laboured to ascertain, without arriving at any conclusive decision.



The complaint is of comparatively rare occurrence, and its connexion in most cases, with the puerperal condition, has induced writers, to adopt an hypothesis respecting its origin, too exclusive, and as to its nature unsatisfactory.

The latest observations and experience, have furnished numerous facts inconsistent with the ingenious theories advanced by the earlier writers. It is now admitted, that it is a more common affection than was formerly supposed, and it evidently has existed independent of the puerperal state.

There is scarcely any uniformity as to the period of its occurrence, and in the manner in which it invades the system. That other parts than the inferior extremities may, under particular circumstances, become its seat, that it is not unfrequently a consequential disease both various in its causes, and formidable in its character. There is unquestionably in many cases, a connexion between the puerperal state,

reduci de la sua vocazione di curare le sue  
condizioni di salute mentale e di quell'  
indispettito di cose da qualche modo  
che si è venuto a conoscere della sua  
vita privata di un suo conoscente che  
aveva fatto una certa somma di denaro  
e che aveva deciso di non far più nulla  
con quel denaro, ma di donarne tutto  
a un istituto di carità, il quale era stato  
fondato da un sacerdote che aveva  
vissuto per trent'anni per servire la sua  
chiesa in servizio di Dio e degli uomini.  
Era stato molto amato, tanto che molti  
di coloro che erano stati suoi amici  
erano venuti da lui per dire addio  
e per consigliargli di non far più nulla  
con quel denaro, ma di donarne tutto  
a un istituto di carità, il quale era stato

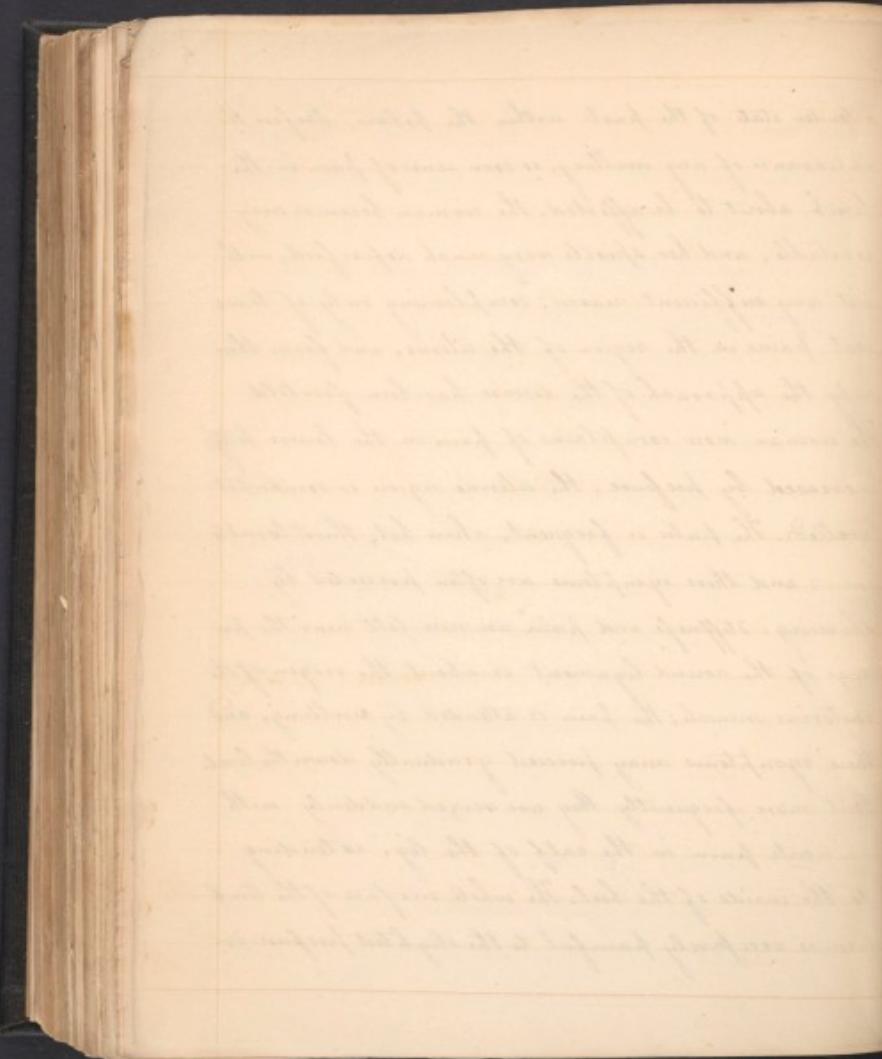
and Phlegmasia Dolens, yet, the latter has taken place, where the former had not existed, or where the interval was so great, as to forbid the presumption of any relationship. I have just affirmed, that the disease in question may, and does arise independent of the puerperal condition: In fact the disease is sometimes no little connected with the female functions, that we find the other sex not exempt from it.

Dr Heuerman of Ontario New York, has detailed the history of a case of the disease in a young man aged 17, and so far as a single instance can be brought to militate against a general rule; it furnishes conclusive evidence, that the superior extremities may become the seat of the disease. All the extremities, both arms and legs, were affected successively, and acquired the glabrous aspect and other pathognomonic symptoms of this striking affection.

Symptoms. When it affects puerperal women, it is usually preceded by marks of uterine irritation, and

the first time I have seen it. It is a very  
large tree, with a trunk about 12 feet in diameter.  
The bark is smooth and greyish-white,  
with some longitudinal wrinkles. The leaves  
are large, elliptical, pointed at the apex,  
and have a serrated margin. They are  
arranged in whorls along the branches.  
The flowers are small, white, and bell-shaped,  
and are produced in clusters at the ends of  
the branches. The fruit is a small, round,  
yellowish-orange drupe, with a single seed  
inside. The wood is hard and durable,  
and is used for making furniture and  
other household articles. It is also used  
for making charcoal and for fuel.

a tender state of the parts within the pelvis. Before the appearance of any swelling, or even sense of pain in the limb about to be affected, the woman becomes very irritable, and her spirits very much depressed, without any sufficient reason, complaining only of transient pains in the region of the uterus, and from these only the approach of the disease has been foretold. The woman now complains of pain in the lower belly increased by pressure; the uterine region is somewhat swollen. The pulse is frequent, skin hot, thirst troublesome; and these symptoms are often preceded by shivering: stiffness and pain are now felt near the passage of the round ligament or about the origin of the sartorius muscle; the pain is attended by swelling, and these symptoms may proceed gradually down the limb. But more frequently they are seized suddenly with an acute pain in the calf of the leg, extending to the inside of the heel. The whole surface of the limb becomes excessively painful to the slightest pressure or



own touch; yet, without any apparent change, except the skin is gloomy, and of a deadly paleness.

The countenance and the whole body has a certain degree of paleness, not unlike that of chlorotic or Droppical persons. In about 24 hours after the pain commences, the limb begins to swell, and the pain is abated, in proportion to the swelling, but not entirely removed. From the moment of the attack all power of acting with the limb is lost; this however does not depend altogether on the pain; but also for a want of command over the muscles. It becomes tense hot and tumid but not red.

There are many varieties in the manner in which the disease commences, as well in its degree, as progr.; in some cases, the access of the disease is slower, and symptoms less violent, hesitating as it were, whether the disease should be formed or not.

It happens at no precise time after delivery, as it has come on at any period, from the fifth or sixth



day even to the end of the month, but most commonly from the fifth to the fourteenth day.

The constitution is speedily and greatly affected, the pulse is very frequent being often 140 in the minute and generally quick and feeble, heat of body much increased; the tongue white and moist or clammy, the countenance pale, and dejected; Thirst considerable; the appetite is lost, the bowels are either bound and the stools clay coloured or they are loose and the stools very fetid and bilious, the urine is voided in small quantities, is thick and of a muddy colour, unlike what has been observed in any other disease; the muddiness gradually disappears as the disease abates. The Lochial discharge sometimes stops or becomes fetid, in other cases it is not at all affected. The nights are spent without sleep and the patient perspires freely.

After eight or ten days continuance according to its lenity or violence, the most urgent symptoms of the disease begin to abate.

John Lang

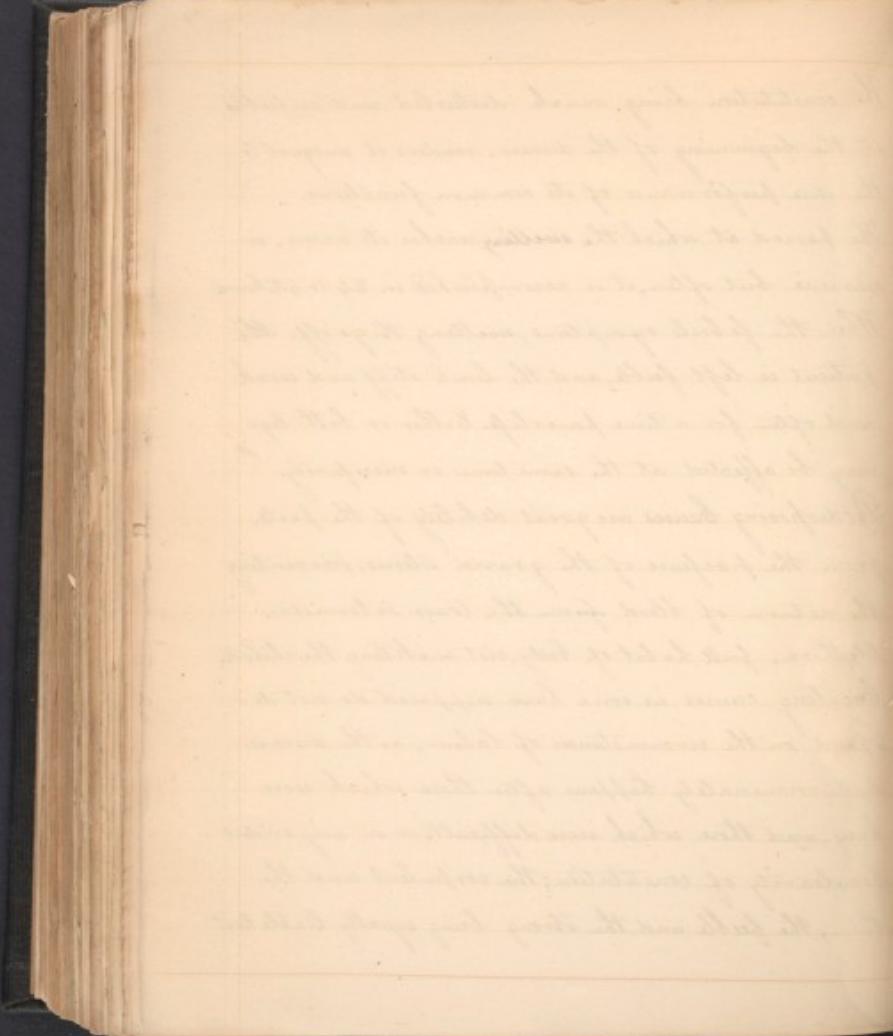
The constitution being much disturbed and enfeebled at the beginning of the disease, renders it unequal to the due performance of its common functions.

The period at which the swelling reaches its acme, is various, but often, it is accomplished in 24 or 48 hours. When the febrile symptoms, swelling &c. go off, the patient is left feeble, and the limb stiff and weak, and often for a time powerless. Either or both legs may be affected at the same time or successively.

Predisposing causes are great debility of the parts, from the pressure of the gravid uterus; preventing the return of blood from the lower extremities.

Plethora, full habit of body, not sucking the child.

Exciting causes as some have supposed do not depend on the circumstances of labour, as the disease indiscriminately happens after those which were easy, and those which were difficult, or on any evident peculiarity of constitution; the corpulent and the thin, the feeble and the strong being equally liable to it.



or on rank in life, as the rich and the poor are alike subject to it, or on any peculiar treatment in child bed. Nor does any appearance during pregnancy denote a disposition to it: the swelling of the inferior extremities being totally a different complaint.

But the whole disease seems to arise from some circumstance, that occurs after delivery: It happens to those who had an abundance of milk, and those who had a scarcity, those who did, and those who did not give suck, and sometimes though rarely in abortions. In fact the disease has not hitherto been the subject of accurate and sufficient pathological investigation, and its causes are still obscure.

When we can detect any exciting cause, it is either contusions of the limb, or too great a quantity of food of an improper quality, wine or heating drinks, but most generally cold, which by checking the excretions & secretions give rise to the disease.

Resolution is the most frequent and desirable termin-



mation, the effused fluid being taken up by the absorbents, the patient recovers. But unfortunately, it sometimes happens that suppuration supervenes and ulcers are formed, which are difficult to heal.

In some few cases gangrene has been the termination, and in some instances the patient has been destroyed before either suppuration or gangrene has happened.

### Thickening

Post mortem examinations show an extraordinary thickening of the cutis and adjoining cellular membrane; the large veins of the limb are inflamed; the inguinal glands are enlarged sometimes schirrous and at others not at all affected. But the muscles bone and other parts are free from any disease.

It has been common with almost all the popular writers (as I have before state) on Phlegmasia Dolens to consider it as inseparably connected with the pernicious stat and all their theoretically doctrines concerning its proximate cause are accordingly



built upon this assumption. It may not be improper, before I proceed to the treatment, to notice some of the most celebrated theories in the order in which they occurred.

The first general idea on this subject deserving of notice, is that which was suggested by Mauriceau, in which he imputes the disease in question, to a metastasis of the Kochia.

The 2<sup>d</sup> theory to account for the same phenomena consists in the particular application to this subject of the celebrated doctrine of the metastasis of milk. This was first advanced by Puzos towards the middle of the last century; since that period, it has maintained a brilliant reputation in the continental schools of medicine where indeed it has received several varieties of form to suit the plastic fancies of several writers, who have received and supported it. These are so obviously incorrect that they need no comment.

A third theory which has been formed on this subject,



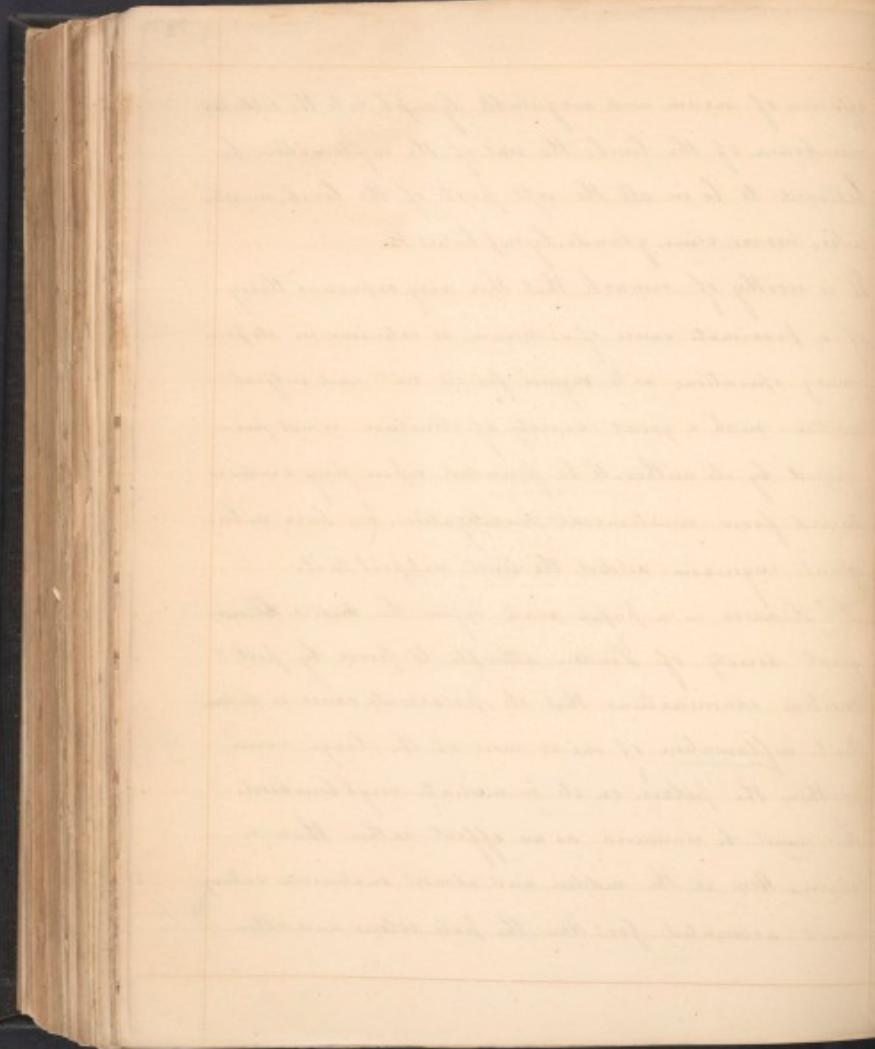
which like its predecessor, has been presented under several different modifications, is that of obstruction or other morbid states of the Lymphatic organs, caused by offensive discharges from the uterus. The authors who first espoused this, in publications professedly on the subject, have been Mr White of Manchester and Mr Joye of Gloucester. If it were caused by a rupture of the Lymphatics, we should have the same phenomena present in two instances: Their circulation is stopped in the application of the Tourniquet and there is no such bad effect. But the fact, that the disease in question, never arises from the offensive discharge of the womb, that take place in numerous diseases, with which the organ is affected, and the disease occurring independent of parturition, affords abundant refutation of that doctrine. Dr Hall published his essay on Phlegmata Dolens in 1800, in which he attempted to establish, that the proximate cause of the disease in question consists in an inflammatory affection, producing suddenly a considerable



effusion of serum and coagulable lymph into the cellular membrane of the limb; the seat of the inflammation he believed to be in all the soft parts of the limb, muscles, arteria, nerves, veins, glands, lymphatics &c.

It is worthy of remark, that this very capacious theory of a proximate cause of a disease, so extensive in its primary operations as to require for its seat and subject matter such a great variety of structure, is not professed by its author, to be founded upon any evidence derived from anatomical investigation, nor have subsequent inquiries added the least support to it.

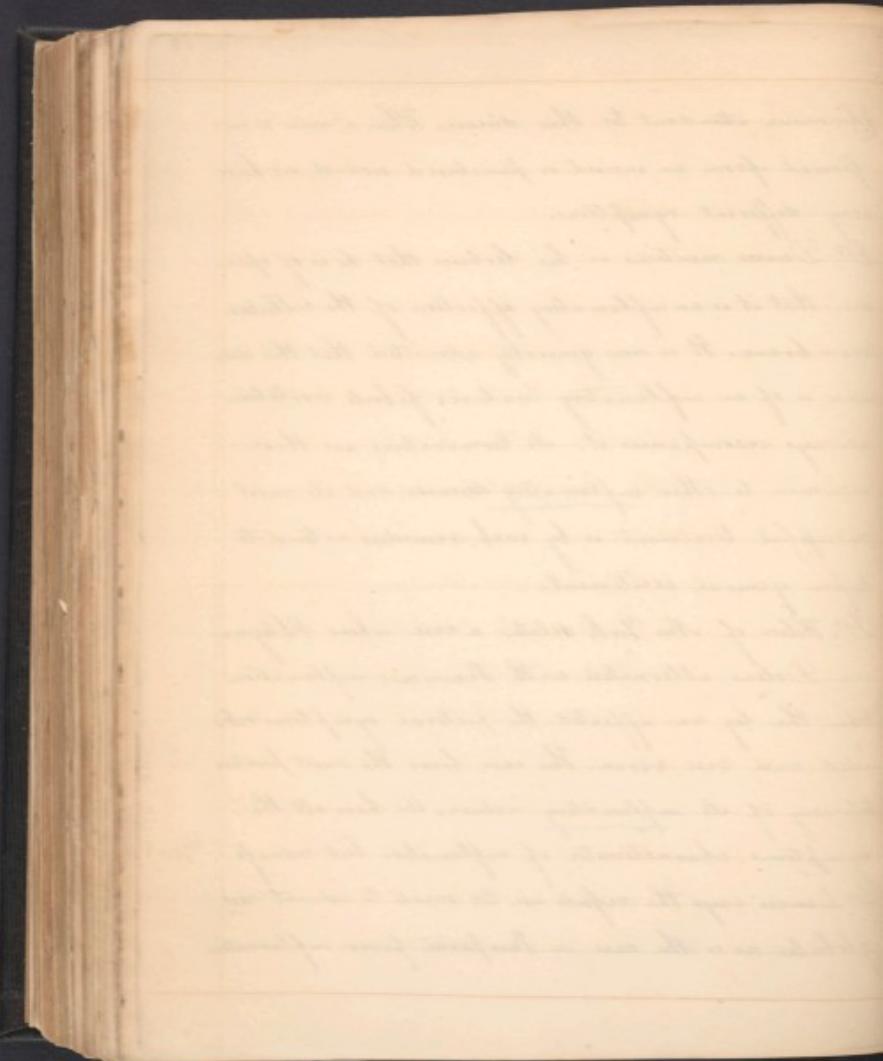
Dr Davies in a paper read before the Andover Chirurgical society of London, attempts to prove by post mortem examinations, that its proximate cause is a violent inflammation of one or more of the large veins within the pelvis, or its immediate neighbourhood. This must be considered as an effect rather than a cause; How is the sudden and almost instantaneous enlargement accounted for? How the pale colour and other



phenomena attendant to this disease. When a vein is inflamed from an incised or punctured wound, we have very different symptoms.

Dr Devees mentions in his lecture that he is of opinion, that it is an inflammatory affection of the cellular membrane. It is now generally admitted that this disease is of an inflammatory nature; febrile irritation always accompanies it; its terminations are those common to other inflammatory diseases; and its most successful treatment is by such remedies as tend to lessen general excitement.

Dr Wilson of New York relates a case where Phlegmatura Dolens alternated with Pneumonic inflammation; when the leg was affected, the pectoral symptoms subsided and vice versa. This case bears the most positive testimony of its inflammatory nature. We have all the symptoms characteristic of inflammation but redness Dr Devees says the vessels are too small to admit red globules as is the case in Puerperal fever, inflammation



of the eye, and mammary abscess. But the Pathology of this disease is still obscure and future observations must assign to it its proper rank in nosological arrangement. But happily for its unfortunate subjects, one general plan of treatment is pursued by all.

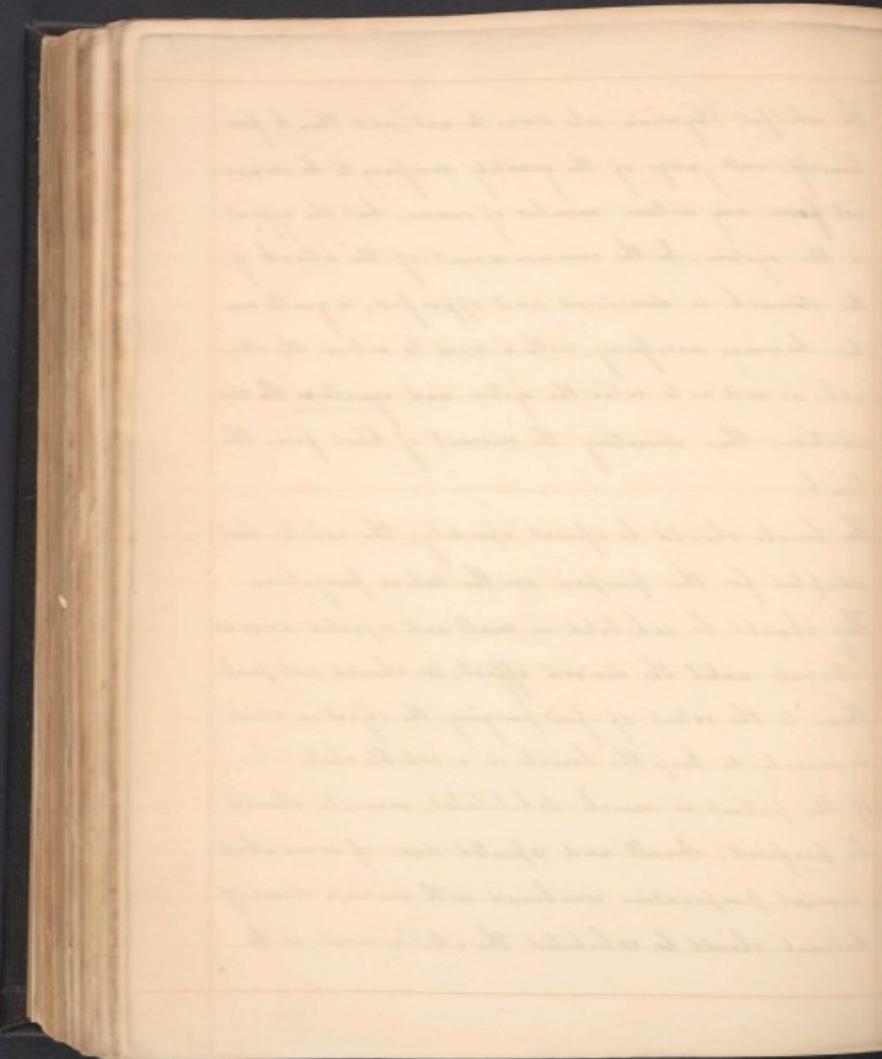
It naturally divides itself into that of the limb and that of the constitution. When the patient is of a robust habit and is attacked with a painful tense swelling of one of the lower extremities, accompanied by much heat, thirst, asthenia and other symptoms of pyrexia, the Antiphlogistic plan of treatment ought certainly to be pursued, treating it as a general inflammatory affection; not as a local disease.

The most effectual means of diminishing the plethora of the blood vessels and of diverting the irritation from the part affected should be employed; with this view the patient must be bled freely and the bleeding must be repeated as often as the urgency of the symptoms may require.

and the same time the  
whole country was covered with a dense  
growth of vegetation. The soil was  
thin and light-colored, and the surface  
was covered with a dense growth of  
herbs and small shrubs. The trees  
were scattered here and there, and  
the ground was covered with a thick  
layer of fallen leaves and twigs.  
The air was very humid, and the  
temperature was high. The sun  
was bright, and the sky was clear.  
The water in the streams was  
clear and cold, and the fish  
swam easily in it. The birds  
were numerous, and their  
songs were pleasant to hear.  
The animals were numerous,  
and the deer, bear, and other  
wild animals were seen frequently.  
The people were friendly,  
and the houses were well-constructed.  
The food was delicious, and the  
people were hospitable. The  
whole country was a paradise,  
and the people were happy.

The skilful Physician who dares to act and think for himself, will judge of the quantity necessary to be drawn, not from any certain number of ounces, but the effect on the system. In the commencement of the attack if the stomach is disordered and oppressed, a gentle emetic becomes necessary, with a view to relieve the stomach, as well as to relax the system and equalise the circulation, thus diverting the current of blood from the limb.

The bowels should be opened speedily; the articles best adapted for this purpose are the saline purgatives. They should be exhibited in small and repeated doses at intervals until the desired effect; we should not push them to the extent of full purging; the object in view is merely to keep the bowels in a soluble state. If the patient is much debilitated, enemata should be preferred. Small and repeated doses of some Antimonials preparation combined with minute doses of Calomel should be exhibited; the Antimonial is to



promote a regular and gentle determination to the surface, while the calomel restores to their natural state the depraved secretions.

The pain is so intense, that it is impossible for the patient to enjoy the least repose; after the proper evacuations have been promised. Opium is a safe and advantagious remedy; we may use the Dovers Powder or we may unite the Opium with Calomel and Antimony or Spirits of Mildereri and Laudanum, taking care not to debilitate the patient too much by exciting a profuse diaphoresis.

Dr Hosack has treated this affection with success by a combination of Calomel and squills, treating it as if it were a Droppedical affection. It is much to be doubted whether the diuretic operation of the Squills had any efficacy in the removal of the disease. If the preceding remedies should fail to have the desired effect, and the disease continue with unabated violence a slight ptyalism should



be induced as a dernier alternative.

We have now given the treatment, which we consider necessary for the removal of the affection of the system; Our attention is next directed to the local treatment, When the inflammatory symptoms run high, leeches applied to the groin have been found of great service. So great is the reliance of some practitioners in this remedy that it precludes in their opinion, the necessity of general bleeding; After which, blisters to the groin are universally recommended; cloths wrung out of hot vinegar applied to the leg or the vapour bath of Vinegar have succeeded remarkably well in moderating the pain and tension; they are more serviceable after the proper evacuations have been made. This simple means assisted by keeping the bowels open, has been adopted with invariable success in one of the best regulated Lyngby Hospitals in Europe. Should these fail more powerful sedatives or diuretic remedies may be used, as an infusion of poppy heads, Camphorated oil, solution of



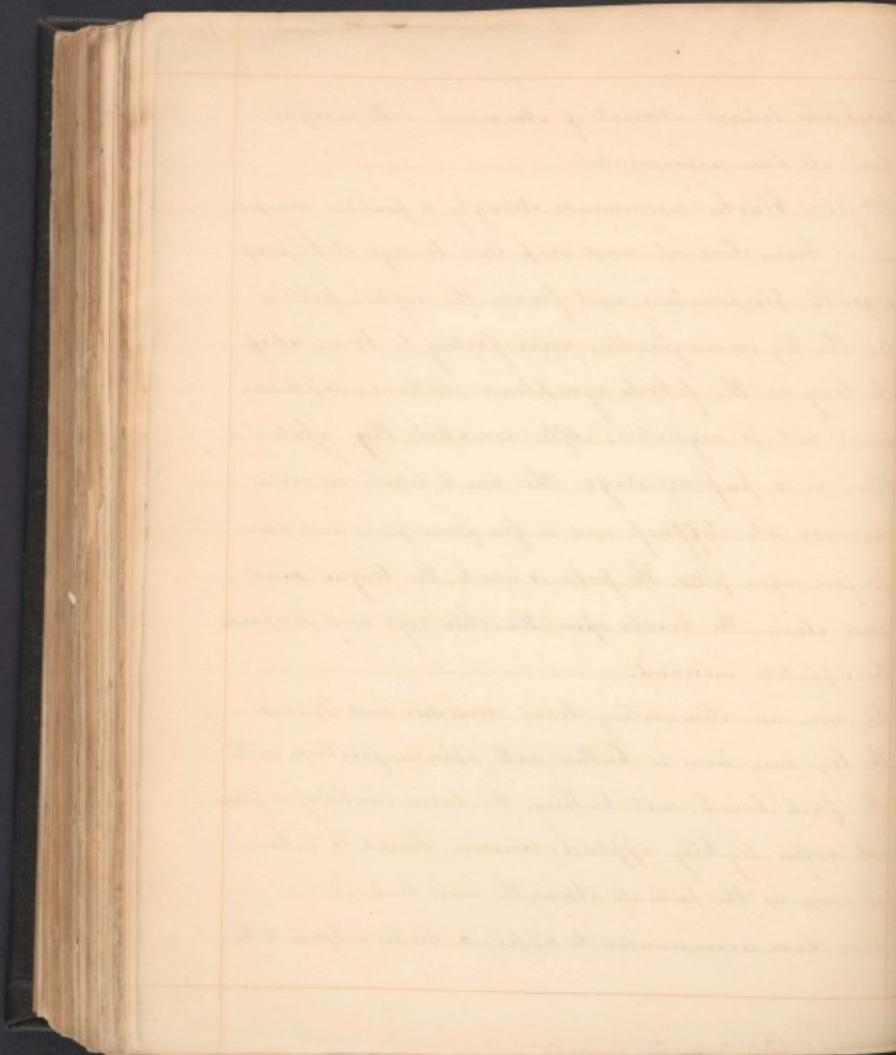
saccharum sativum. Muriat of Ammonia with vinegar  
have all been recommended.

Dr John Clarke recommends strongly a poultice composed of bran, olive oil, and soap lass: he says it keeps up a gentle perspiration and forms the softest pillow for the leg imaginable, never failing to bring relief. As long as the febrile symptoms continue, depletion must not be neglected: after some time they abate and there is a paroxysm stage, the limb loses in some measure its stiffness and is free from pain, and when pressed upon feels. The pulse is weak, the tongue moist and clean, the bowels open, the skin soft and perspirable the appetite increased.

We now use stimulating local remedies and Tonics.

The leg may now be bathed with spirits, frictions with the flesh brush, salt bathing, the laced stocking or flannel roller tightly applied; exercise should be taken as soon as the patient's strength will bear it.

Some have recommended to apply a blister or sponge to the



calf of the leg to drain off the effused fluid; this is a hazardous remedy being apt to cause ulceration.

When there is an offensive discharge from the uterus inject tepid water or an infusion of Chamomile flowers  
Regimen. The patient should be confined to bed as soon as taken, she should be covered lightly with the bed clothes, a large well ventilated room is to be preferred; the leg must be extended and the clothes elevated.

Diet. In the inflammatory stage the diet should consist entirely of the demulcent and acidulated drinks as barley water, lemonade, apple water, toast water, beef tea and chicken water &c. But as soon as the inflammatory symptoms subside then we use tonics and a nutritious diet. If the stomach is debilitated we may give wine in small quantities, Hock-hanis Linet bark, Columbia, Gentian &c.

The food should be nourishing and easily digested, at first the farinaceous articles as Sago, Tapioca Arrow root, should be given, and after awhile Oysters



blither &c. so as to increase its strength gradually.  
Here I conclude, but not without expressing a wish,  
that those who have more time and talents allowed  
them than I have, would take up the subject and  
do it justice. The candid critic will look with  
an indulgent eye upon my errors, and recollect  
that I write from compulsion; The better inform  
ed will supply my deficiencies.





